COMMENTARY

The Cross-Strait Conundrum

Assessing the Viability of a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan

Shaheer Ahmad

Abstract

This article analyzes the geopolitical landscape in East Asia, focusing on the possibility of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. It explores China's strategic objectives, military preparations, and the challenges it would face in executing such an operation. Despite China's growing military capabilities, Taiwan's geographic advantages, robust defense systems, and significance in global supply chains make an invasion a formidable and risky undertaking. The article also considers the potential involvement of allies and the broader implications for international relations. It concludes that maintaining the status quo is in the best interest of all parties involved.

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The twenty-first century has witnessed a profound shift in the geopolitical landscape, as described by Williamson Murray as "uncontrollable, unpredictable, and above all unforeseeable."[1] Recent events, such as the unprecedented invasion of Ukraine, serve as stark reminders that the element of surprise remains a significant factor in international relations.[2] In East Asia, Chinese preparations for a potential invasion of Taiwan are sending shockwaves through the region's geopolitical dynamics. China's remarkable rise as a formidable challenger to the United States has made the "Taiwan question" increasingly unavoidable. The once-turbulent waters of the strait have now become a theater filled with roaring fighter jets, military exercises, and strategic bluffs.

Under the leadership of Chinese paramount leader Xi Jinping, whose posture grows increasingly vigorous and nationalist, questions arise regarding the potential risk of a military confrontation with the United States if China proceeds with an invasion of Taiwan. As the regional military balance gradually shifts in China's favor, Chinese defense papers outline several possible scenarios for retaking the renegade province. China's doctrinal approach of "winning local wars under high technology conditions" is aimed at preventing Taiwan's independence and fa-

[1] Williamson Murray, "Thinking about Revolution in Military Affairs," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (Summer 1997), 71, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/.

[2] Shaheer Ahmad, "Enigma Unveiled: Understanding Russian Strategic Mindset and its Implications for the Indo-Pacific," *Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers*, 30 April 2023, https://indopacificresearchers.org/.

cilitating the long-held goal of national rejuvenation. Following Nancy Pelosi's notable visit to Taiwan, Chinese leaders seized the initiative and attempted to normalize their encroachment across the median line. The People's Liberation Army (PLA), currently undergoing a defense overhaul, has emphasized the concept of *xixinhua*, or "informatized" wars. With increasing military capabilities, the PLA possesses a tactical and operational edge over Taiwan's military, bolstering its confidence in undertaking the primary mission of retaking Taiwan.

However, the situation is far from straightforward, primarily due to Taiwan's own military capabilities. While China boasts the world's largest and most formidable air defense systems, considerable firepower, network-centric warfare capabilities, and substantial manpower, the act of invading Taiwan would disrupt international relations overnight, resulting in severe disruptions to global supply chains. Additionally, China faces limitations in both horizontal and vertical escalations, coupled with deficiencies in its operational art. Furthermore, the logistical challenges, unique topography, Taiwan's military capabilities, and the PLA's limitations in critical domains pose significant obstacles to China's course of action regarding Taiwan. The complexities involved in this potential conflict cannot be underestimated.

Taiwan: A Dangerous Contingency

Taiwan, often likened to a cork in a bottle, remains a crucial factor in limiting Chinese expansion in the Western Pacific, as Michael Beckley describes it as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" enabling China's military projection in the region.[3] Conversely, for the United States, Taiwan holds significant prestige and serves as the sole Chinese democracy on the planet. The conquest of Taiwan would release a substantial portion of China's budget, military personnel, frigates, destroyers, and aircraft carriers, while also consolidating Chinese grand strategy domestically.[4] With China's military rise and distractions faced by the United States, the current climate appears to be a "ripe moment" for Beijing to retake the renegade province and achieve its goal of national rejuvenation.

However, the invasion of Taiwan carries inherent risks due to its global significance within supply chains. Such an act would trigger an international response, resulting in economic and diplomatic sanctions against China. The United States

[3] Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 78.

[4] Paul. V. Kane, "To Save our Economy, Ditch Taiwan," *New York Times*, 10 November 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/.

and its allies are thus working to ensure that the aftermath of an invasion inflicts more harm on China than the existing status quo.[5]

Xi's assertive posture, distinct from his predecessors, has led many commentators to believe that the era of China's peaceful rise and Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum of "hide your strength and bide your time" is over. As the regional military balance progressively shifts in favor of China, concerns grow among analysts who fear that unchecked Chinese military prowess will ultimately challenge US dominance in the skies and seas of East Asia. However, a careful examination reveals that invading a developed island remains a mission impossible in modern times, given Taiwan's geography, military power, resolute capacity, durability, and its vital role within global supply chains. These factors make invasion an unlikely option for China.

The strategic significance and challenges surrounding a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan underscore the complexities and potential consequences of such a high-stakes geopolitical maneuver.

East Asian Conundrum: China's Aggressive Interplay

China's grand strategy revolves around reclaiming lost territories and maintaining a favorable balance of power in its neighborhood.[6] On 1 February 2023, the PLA dispatched approximately 20 aircraft to breach the median line separating Taiwan from the mainland.[7] In response, Taiwan scrambled jets and activated its air defense systems. The repeated violation of Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) has become a routine for the PLA, which no longer respects the sanctity of the median line. Last year alone, the number of ADIZ breaches doubled, reaching a recorded 1,727 instances.[8] These actions align with China's objectives of weakening Taiwan's military readiness and ensuring the PLA's preparedness for a potential operation to retake what Beijing regards as a renegade province.

China's assertive military maneuvers have raised concerns in Washington, and it is now widely assumed that the invasion of Taiwan is a matter of "when" rather than "if." The US Department of Defense, along with its allies, is working to

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[5] Jared M. McKinney and Peter Harris, "Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan," *Parameters* 51, no. 4 (November 2021), 29, doi: 10.55540/0031-1723.3089.

[6] Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos: China's Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 145.

[7] "Taiwan activates defenses in response to China incursions," *AP News*, 1 February 2023, https://apnews.com/.

[8] Agence France-Presse, "China's warplane incursions into Taiwan air defence zone doubled in 2022," *The Guardian*, 2 January 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/.

convey to Beijing that the peace resulting from an invasion would be more detrimental than the current status quo. To this end, a deal has been signed with the Philippines to expand US military bases in the region. Similarly, a marine corps contingent is expected to be deployed in Okinawa to ensure swift mobilization in the event of a Taiwan emergency.[9]

PLA strategic documents envision a war initiated through aerial and missile strikes targeting Taiwan's air bases, missile batteries, and air defense systems, employing volleys launched by ground and air-launched missile batteries. The objective of this campaign is to render Taiwanese defenses powerless before they have a chance to strike back. China's hope of establishing aerial and naval superiority in the conflict hinges on neutralizing Taiwan's air defenses and stand-off weaponry. The success of the joint firepower strike campaign will pave the way for a successful amphibious invasion (island landing), strategic bombing, and the enforcement of a naval blockade. However, despite possessing aerial, naval, and firepower capabilities, the Chinese course of action is constrained by numerous tangible and intangible factors.

Navigating the complex landscape surrounding a potential invasion of Taiwan poses significant challenges for China's grand strategy, requiring careful con-sideration of both military capabilities and broader geopolitical dynamics.

Constraining Chinese Invasion

The PLA has several means and options at its disposal to invade Taiwan and achieve a fait accompli, including joint firepower strike campaigns, island landing, and naval blockade. PLA texts describe joint firepower strike campaigns as offensive operations conducted by all three services against long-range targets. The objective is to coerce the enemy's leadership, break their will to fight, and force them to abandon their strategic designs.[10] PLA strategy documents reveal that China plans to initiate the war by launching a blitz on Taiwan's air and naval bases, missile batteries, and command-and-control systems.[11]

The success of the firepower campaign is crucial to neutralize Taiwan's defenses before they have a chance to retaliate. Aerial superiority is thus a prerequisite for a successful amphibious invasion, as failing to achieve it would undermine the prospects of a victorious island landing. Undertaking an amphibious invasion is a

[9] "U.S Marines to set up unit in Okinawa for remote Japan Island defense," *Kyodo News*, 10 January 2023, https://english.kyodonews.net/.

[10] Dang Chongmin and Zhang Yu, *Science of Joint Operations* (Beijing: PLA Press, 2009), 173–74.

[11] Guangqian Peng and Youzhi Yao, *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2005), 327.

notoriously challenging and technical mission, regardless of a military's size or capability. Despite China possessing the largest navy, a significant ballistic missile inventory, enhanced firepower, and the second-largest military budget after the United States, crossing the 160-kilometer-wide strait is far from an easy task for the PLA.[12] Invading Taiwan requires an amphibious landing, which is hindered by sea mines and antiship batteries on rocky terrain, making a D-Day-style landing highly improbable.

Historical evidence suggests that Taiwan's air defenses are likely to survive the initial assault by the PLA. In the Gulf War, despite the coalition forces pounding Iraq with 88,500 pounds of ordnance and destroying Iraqi airfields with cluster bombs, the Iraqi air force and its mobile launchers remained operational. Confirming the destruction of any mobile launcher during the campaign proved impossible.[13] Similarly, the Falklands War demonstrated the failure of an am-phibious invasion, with Argentina, despite the British military's prowess, sinking a considerable portion of the British fleet. China's naval losses would undoubtedly be greater, given their vulnerability to Taiwan's long-range artillery.

China is also aware of its lack of operational experience and capabilities in both air and sea warfare. In the case of Taiwan, the PLA would need to outnumber the defending forces and establish a beachhead on Taiwan's shores to reinforce the landing troops. However, Taiwan's geography, characterized by steep cliffs, marshes, torrential rains, and unpredictable tides, poses significant challenges to a successful island landing. Moreover, Taiwan's antiship missile batteries and artillery have the potential to weaken the PLA fleet and inflict damage on landing sites.

The PLA has previously demonstrated deficiencies in critical missions such as strategic airlift, logistics, and antisubmarine warfare, which further limit the prospects of success in a cross-strait conflict. According to PLA literature, the PLA commanders lack the ability to judge situations, understand top-level intentions, make operational decisions, and deal with unexpected conditions, revealing their limitations. Therefore, while PLA commanders may exaggerate their war preparedness, doing so entails enormous potential risks.

On the other hand, Taiwan possesses notorious early airborne warning systems, fixed early warning radars, and E-2 Hawkeye aircraft that can anticipate PLA

[12] Harlan Ullman, "Reality Check #10: China will not invade Taiwan," *Atlantic Council*, 18 February 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/.

[13] Herman L. Gilster, "Desert Storm: War, Time and Substitution Revisited," *Airpower Journal* (Spring 1996): 82–93, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/.

actions and inform command-and-control systems prior to an invasion. If Taiwan were to detect an incoming PLA invasion early, it would have sufficient time to deploy its navy and scramble F-16 fighter jets to intercept the intruding forces. Additionally, Taiwan is considering purchasing 400 antiship land-launched Har-poon missiles to bolster its capabilities against a potential Chinese amphibious assault.[14] Taiwan's air defense includes long-range surface-to-air missile launchers, mostly road-mobile, as well as short-range ballistic missile launchers in under-ground silos, missile batteries, and howitzers aimed at mainland China, capable of launching offensive operations on Chinese bases.

Lastly, the factor of allies' involvement demands attention. The possible participation of key US allies, Australia and Japan, poses a worrisome challenge to China's ambitions. According to Elbridge A. Colby, if China cannot project its military prowess across the straits, it raises doubts about their prospects beyond the first island chain.[15] Beijing would certainly strive to avoid entangling itself on multiple fronts in the region. Therefore, a cost-benefit analysis indicates that employing brute force or coercion becomes a double-edged sword for China.

Conclusion: Reimagining International Relations

Military action against Taiwan would severely undermine China's strategic posture and potentially force Xi's defense overhaul, aimed at transforming the PLA into a capable force for informatized warfare, into a "reverse gear." Despite Xi's objectives for defense modernization, the PLA has yet to fully benefit from its modernization efforts. Deficiencies in critical domains, along with a lack of realistic combat training conditions, restrict the PLA's prospects of achieving success in a Taiwan contingency. Merely increasing capabilities cannot compensate for the absence of combat proficiency, especially for a force that has not engaged in a major war since the Vietnam War in 1979.

Taiwan's advanced air defenses, antiship missile batteries, F-16 fighter falcons, and formidable E2 Hawkeyes would present a daunting challenge to the invading PLA. Additionally, countries like Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines are likely to pursue military modernization efforts that could undermine China's goal of maintaining a favorable balance of power in the region. Considering these factors, a Taiwan contingency represents a dangerous geopolitical gamble for China.

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[14] Anthony Capaccio, "Taiwan to buy 400 US anti-ship missiles intended to repel a Chinese invasion," *Bloomberg*, 18 April 2023, https://www.bloomberg.com/.

[15] Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CRT: Yale University Press, 2021), 173.

Therefore, maintaining the status quo on the island is in the best interest of all stakeholders involved. ✪

Shaheer Ahmad

Mr. Ahmad is a research scholar based in National Defence University, Pakistan, and a research assistant at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.

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